

Volatility: much movement but no earthquake

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As the 2014 elections approached it seemed as if the stage was set for large-scale swings in which the parties in the Federal government on both sides of the language boundary would lose out to challengers from the left and the right. But all in all, a glance at the election results of 25 May suggests that any upheaval was limited. Although the centre right, Flemish Nationalist N-VA took another quantum leap forward, in comparison with the Federal elections of 2010 the major parties were more or less able to maintain the status quo and together even win an extra seat in the Federal parliament.¹ But was the voting behaviour of the Belgian voters between 2010 and 2014 really so stable? Were there in fact important shifts of allegiance lurking behind the limited swings of the overall election results?

The number of gains and losses in the distribution of votes between the parties do not tell the whole story. We must also investigate to what extent individual voters switched parties between 2010 and 2014. In doing so, we shall pay particular attention to the flow of voters between the various parties. Finally, we shall probe more deeply into the characteristics of volatile electors. Do voters who change parties from one election to the next have a great interest or little interest in politics? Do they have confidence in politics? Are they dissatisfied with government policies? To answer these questions we shall make use of the PartiRep² study of the elections of 2014. In the process of that study a representative cross-section of 2,019 voters in Flanders and Wallonia was interviewed during the run-up to 25 May 2014. Of those respondents, 1,532 also took part in a follow-up telephone interview immediately after the elections.

Net Volatility

Although election results do not tell the whole story they do give some indication of the degree to which voters switch parties between elections. In order to quantify such movements, Mogens Pedersen³ proposed a measure of electoral volatility in party systems, which is known in the literature as an index of 'net volatility'. To obtain this index one simply calculates the absolute difference of each participating party's share of the votes compared with the previous election. These differences are added together but then divided by two because otherwise a voter who changed parties would be counted twice, once when leaving party X and once when voting for party Y. On the basis of that indicator we can assess how volatile the elections of 25 May 2014 were.

Table 1 shows each party's share of the votes in 2014 and whether it won or lost votes compared with the 2010 elections. To make use of the data on individuals in our comparisons we have also broken down the share of votes by region.⁴ We have also added together the share of the francophone FDF and MR of the votes in 2014 because in 2010 they were still working together. The comparison shows that any swings were limited. From Table 1 it can

be seen that the centre right, Flemish Nationalist N-VA was the biggest winner in Flanders (+4.4%). In Wallonia the victors were the Liberal MR and the Liberal, regionalist FDF who together gained six percentage points compared with 2010 while the net losers were the Socialist PS (-5.6 percentage points). In Flanders the net losers were the far right, Flemish Nationalist Vlaams Belang (-6.8 percentage points).

Table 1. Net swings between the Federal elections of 2010 and 2014

	Result 2010	Result 2014	Δ 2010-2014 (percentage points)	$ \Delta$ 2010-2014 (percentage points)
<i>Flanders</i>				
CD&V	17.6%	18.6%	+1.0	1.0
Groen	7.1%	8.6%	+1.5	1.5
Lijst Dedecker	3.8%	0.7%	-3.1	3.1
N-VA	28.0	32.4	+4.4	4.4
Open VLD	13.7	15.5	+1.8	1.8
PvdA+	1.4%	2.8%	+1.4	1.4
sp.a	15.3%	14.0%	-1.3	1.3
Vlaams Belang	12.6%	5.8%	-6.8	6.8
Other parties	0.5%	1.6%	+1.1	1.1
Total	100.0%	100.0%		22.4
Net volatility				11.2
<i>Wallonia</i>				
cdH	14.6%	14.0%	-0.6	0.6
Ecolo	12.3%	8.2%	-4.1	4.1
FDF		2.4%	+6.0	6.0
MR	22.2%	25.8%		
Parti populaire	3.1%	4.5%	+1.4	1.4
PS	37.6%	32.0%	-5.6	5.6
PTB-Go!		5.5%	+3.6	3.6
PTB+	1.9%			
Other parties	8.3%	7.6%	-0.7	0.7
Total	100.00%	100.00%		22.0
Net volatility				11.0

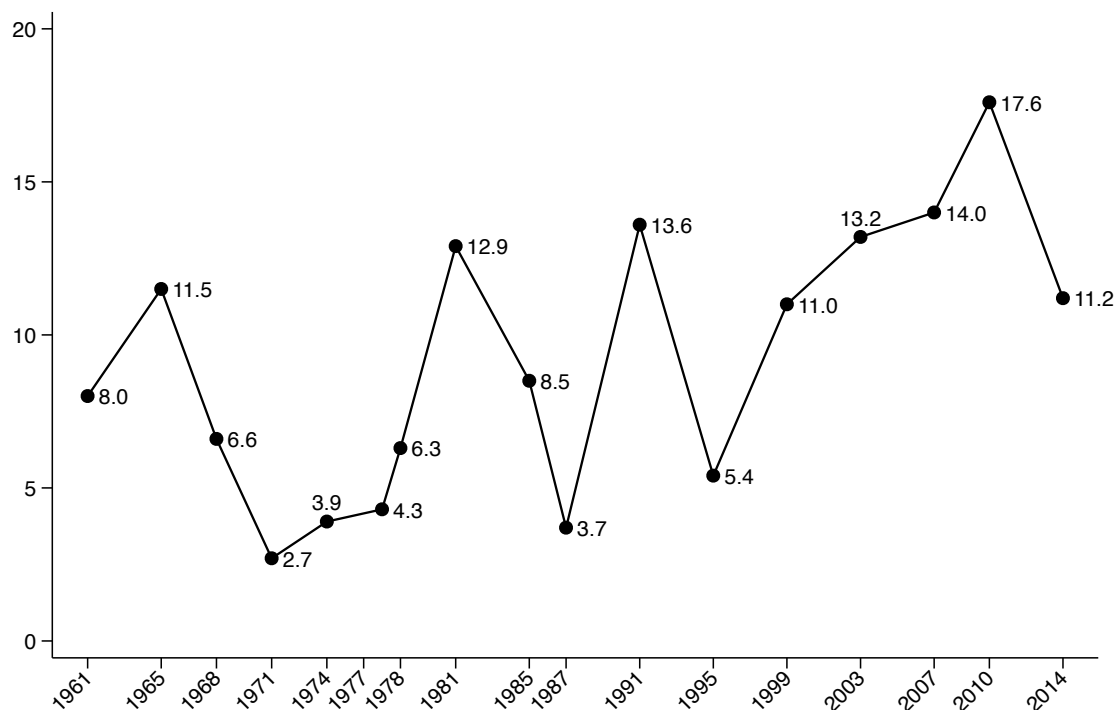
Source: <http://verkiezingen2014.belgium.be>.

The final column of Table 1 shows the absolute value of all the shifts in the Belgian Federal elections of 2014. Adding them all up and dividing them by two provides a net volatility index of 11.2 in Flanders and a somewhat higher index of 14.1 in Wallonia. To place these values in perspective, Figures 1 and 2 show the evolution of the index for Federal elections since 1961.

Net volatility in Belgium has evolved as a series of peaks and troughs. Figure 1 shows some striking peaks in Flanders in 1965, 1981, 1991 and 2010. Since 1995, however, the index has been constant at a rather higher level, and elections with a net indicator of around five seem to be a thing of the past. However, in 2014 there was a notable fall compared with the Federal

elections of 2010. But a volatility index of 11.2 is relatively high and 2014 is still at exactly the same level as, for instance, the elections of 1999 which put an end to the Dehaene governments.

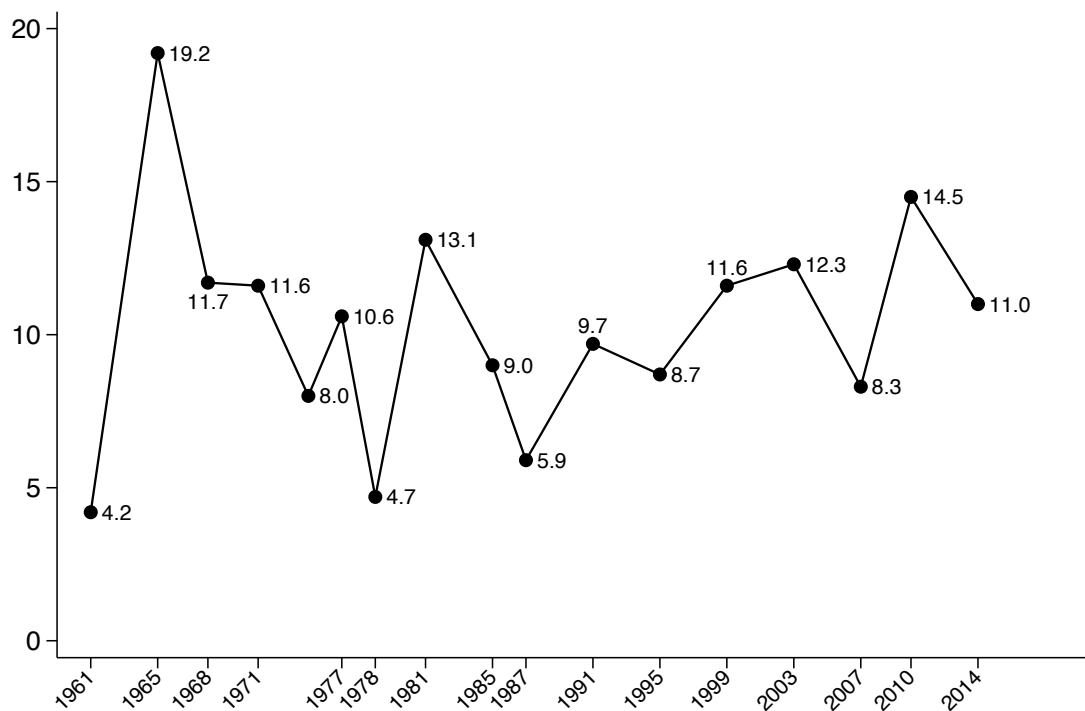
Figure 1. Net volatility (Pedersen index) in Belgian Federal elections (1961-2014) in Flanders



Source: Deschouwer (2009) and supplemented for the most recent elections from:
<http://verkiezingen2014.belgium.be>.

In Wallonia too we see high peaks in 1965, 1981 and 2010 (see Figure 2). For the elections of 25 May 2014, the Pedersen index is about as high as the index for 2010, which makes it the third most volatile Federal election in Wallonia since 1961. The body of Walloon electors in 2014 was therefore exceptionally volatile.

Figure 2. Net volatility (Pedersen index) in Belgian federal elections (1961-2014) in Wallonia



Source: Deschouwer (2009) supplemented for the most recent elections from:
<http://verkiezingen2014.belgium.be>.

However, judging from the election results and the index of net volatility, the elections of 25 May 2014 cannot be regarded as a political earthquake. For Flanders in particular the net swings between 2010 and 2014 were not especially great; despite the leap forward by centre right, Flemish Nationalist N-VA.

Individual ‘switchers’

The great advantage of a net volatility index is that it provides a fairly simple means of making comparisons over periods of time or between countries or regions. Equally important however are its disadvantages.⁵ A significant minus point is undoubtedly that an index of net volatility does not reflect all the individual shifts. The index can be seen as a record of the minimum number of voters who switch parties, but in all probability the actual number of ‘switchers’ will be considerably higher. If 1000 voters move from party A to party B and the same number of voters move in the opposite direction, it will not show up in the index.

To track exactly how many voters switch parties from election to election, data on individuals is needed. Ideally, panel (or longitudinal) data should be used whereby the same voters take part in an electoral survey in successive elections. However, because a panel design is quite expensive, most researchers make use of cross-sectional studies. The degree to which voters switch parties is then tracked by asking voters if they remember which party they voted for in the previous election. Because some voters cannot remember which party they voted for, or because they might want to give the impression of being consistent in their voting, it is generally accepted that this approach also underestimates the scale of individual volatility among the electorate.⁶ Bearing that in mind, we set out to discover how far voters in the elections of 25 May 2014 were prepared to state whether they switched parties after the Federal elections of 2010.

In the PartiRep Electoral Study all the respondents were asked before the elections which party they had voted for in June 2010. Fewer than 5% of them said that they could not remember which party they had supported while a further 2.5% refused to answer the question. All the other respondents indicated which party they had voted for in the 2010 Federal elections. We set this information against their answers after the elections to the question which party they had supported on 25 May 2014. This provided some insight into the way in which voting behaviour had developed between 2010 and 2014.

On the basis of this individual data we found that about 41% of Belgian voters switched parties between the Federal elections of 2010 and 2014. Moreover, Table 2 makes it clear that although voting patterns are traditionally different on either side of the language boundary, the degree of volatility among French-speaking and Dutch-speaking voters was about the same.

Table 2. Stability and party-switching 2010-2014

	Dutch-speaking	French-speaking	Total
Stable	58,3%	60,5%	59,3%
Switched party	41,7%	39,5%	40,7%
Total	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%

Source: PartiRep Election Study 2014. Unweighted data. Only voters who had the vote in 2010 (over 18 years old).

Is the figure of 41% for ‘party-switchers’ a high one? A similar project in the 1980s indicated that fewer than 15% switched parties. In the 1990s it was slightly more than one voter in three.⁷ Finally, a PartiRep election study in 2009 showed that 41% of the voters voted for a different party than they had in 2005.⁸ The number of switchers in 2014 has therefore remained stable in respect of what was observed in 2009, but viewed historically and in absolute terms it is a very high level. It is noteworthy that on the basis of this personal data we can see a clear increase in volatility, whereas the net figures conceal this trend.

Voter flows

Although the actual election results of May 2014 suggest a high level of stability when compared with 2010, the personal data reveal that more than 4 out of 10 voters switched parties between elections. The implication of these contradictory findings is that the shifts could not have been one-way movements but that the extra votes won by some parties were largely neutralised by losses to other parties. The next step, therefore, must be to probe more deeply for an insight into the flow of voters between the various parties.

Let us first consider the shifts between the Dutch-language parties between 2010 and 2014. In Table 3 we show in matrix form the electoral support for the different parties since 2010. The figures on the main diagonal indicate the percentage of consistent supporters for each party. Along that diagonal there are two peaks; a large proportion (73%) of the voters who supported the centre right, Flemish Nationalist N-VA in 2010 remained loyal and voted for N-VA in 2014. In contrast, the support for far right Vlaams Belang as much less loyal. Only 31% of those who voted for it in 2010 did so again in 2014 and an even greater proportion (44%) of far right Vlaams Belang support in 2010 moved over to the centre right N-VA. No other party lost voters so clearly to another single party. Only the Liberal Open VLD came close: 30% of its support in 2010 also migrated to the N-VA. A further point to be noted from the matrix is that nearly half the respondents who stated either that their votes were

blank/invalid or that they did not vote in 2010, voted for the centre right N-VA in 2014. The party was therefore able not only to attract supporters from other parties but also a considerable number of the 2010 non-voters. If we continue to focus on the N-VA the table makes it clear that the party attracted voters primarily from the right. Only a fraction of Green (Groen) and Socialist SP.A voters in 2010 shifted to the N-VA in 2014. In respect of 2010, therefore, the N-VA built up a grouping of voters on the right of the ideological spectrum.

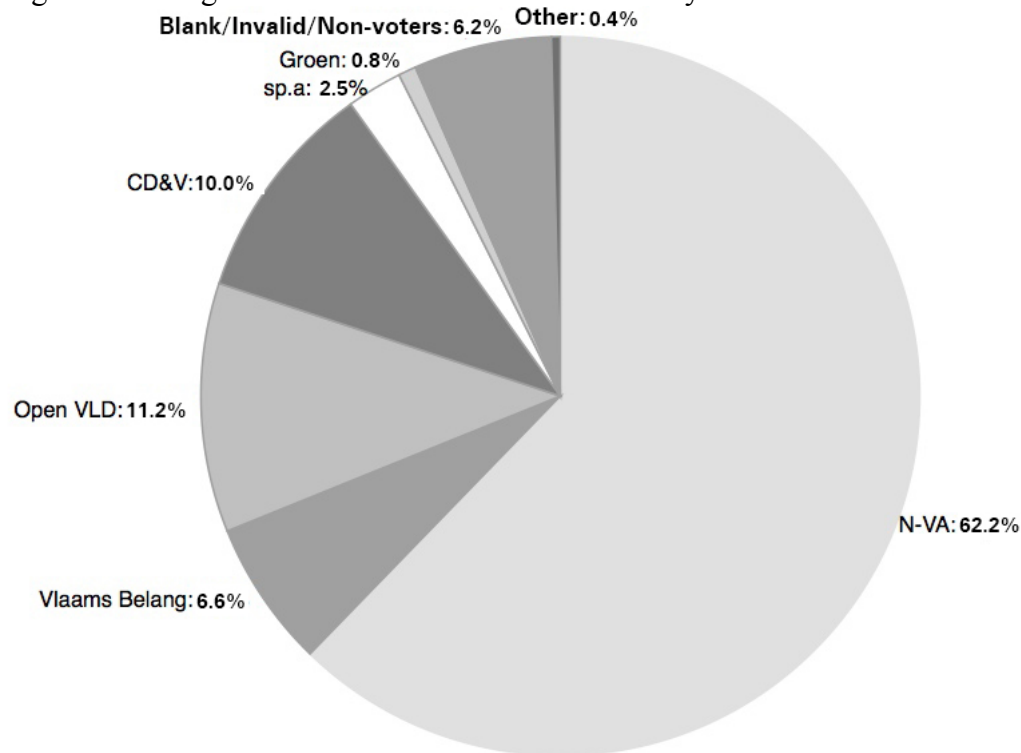
That can be seen in Figure 3 where we show the origins of N-VA supporters in graphical form. More than 60% of them stated that they had also voted for the N-VA in 2010. The majority of the new N-VA voters had voted in 2010 for the far right Vlaams Belang, the Liberal Open VLD or the Christian democratic CD&V. In previous elections the N-VA had grown by attracting support from both left and right.⁹ Now, the party's continued growth in 2014 was chiefly due to the fact that it attracted voters from the right. The personal data shows that 'the right' should be interpreted in a broad sense. Contrary to many assumptions made immediately after the elections, the centre right N-VA did not only attract voters from the far right. Even more centre-party voters switched to N-VA in 2014.

Table 3. Transition matrix – voting flows in Flanders

<i>2014</i>									
	CD&V	Groen	N-VA	sp.a	Vlaams Belang	Open VLD	Other	Blank/invalid	N
<i>2010</i>									
CD&V	58.9%	2.2%	17.5%	5.1%	0.0%	11.7%	1.5%	2.2%	137
Groen	8.3%	62.5%	4.2%	6.3%	0.0%	6.3%	12.5%	0.0%	48
N-VA	9.2%	1.9%	72.8%	4.4%	1.5%	7.8%	1.9%	0.5%	206
sp.a	7.3%	10.4%	6.3%	59.4%	2.1%	4.2%	9.4%	1.0%	96
Vlaams Belang	2.8%	0.0%	44.4%	2.8%	30.6%	11.1%	0.0%	8.3%	36
Open VLD	3.3%	5.5%	29.7%	4.4%	1.1%	52.8%	3.3%	0.0%	91
Other	28.6%	0.0%	14.3%	0.0%	0.0%	14.3%	28.6%	14.3%	7
Blank/invalid	6.1%	6.1%	45.5%	6.1%	3.0%	15.2%	6.1%	12.1%	33
Total	18.3%	8.3%	36.9%	12.7%	2.8%	14.8%	4.7%	1.5%	654

Source: PartiRep Election Study 2014. Unweighted data. Only voters entitled to vote in 2010 (+18 jaar).

Figure 3. Voting behaviour in 2010 as remembered by N-VA voters in 2014



Source: PartiRep Election Study 2014. Unweighted data. Only voters entitled to vote in 2010 (+18 jaar). N = 241.

Table 4 shows the shifts in party support in Wallonia between 2010 and 2014. Here too we see two peaks on the main diagonal. The Green Party, Ecolo, is the party with the least loyal electorate: only slightly more than half (53%) of those who voted for it in 2010 also did so in 2014. Ecolo voters shifted mainly in the direction of the Socialist PS (15%) and the Christian democratic cdH (10%); hardly any of them moved across to the right. Also interesting were the fortunes of the far left PTB-GO! The limited number of respondents who stated that they had voted for the party in 2010 suggests that any claims to party loyalty should be taken with a pinch of salt. However, what is striking is that nearly 10% of the Socialist PS's supporters in 2010 were persuaded to vote for the far left PTBGO! in 2014.

Table 4. Transition matrix – voting flows in Wallonia

<i>2014</i>									
	cdH	Ecolo	FDF	MR	PS	PTB-Go!	Other	Blank/ invalid	N
<i>2010</i>									
cdH	68.3%	3.7%	2.4%	13.4%	8.5%	0.0%	2.4%	1.2%	82
Ecolo	10.3%	52.6%	3.8%	5.1%	15.4%	6.4%	5.1%	1.3%	78
MR	14.4%	1.5%	2.3%	65.2%	5.3%	3.8%	7.6%	0.0%	132
PS	6.6%	2.5%	1.0%	5.1%	69.2%	9.6%	5.1%	1.0%	198
PTB-Go	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	22.2%	0.0%	77.8%	0.0%	0.0%	9
Other	0.0%	0.0%	3.0%	21.2%	3.0%	9.1%	60.6%	3.0%	33
Blank/ invalid	13.2%	5.3%	2.6%	21.1%	31.6%	2.6%	10.5%	13.2%	38
Total	17.7%	9.3%	2.1%	22.5%	30.9%	7.0%	8.8%	1.8%	570

Source: PartiRep electoral survey 2014. Unweighted data. Only voters with the vote in 2010 (+18 jaar). Note that the number of FN-voters was too small for individual analysis. FN voters have been included in the ‘Others’ category.

Characteristics of volatile voters

Among academics, there is great interest in how best to define volatile voters. This focus on ‘party switchers’ is partly driven by a concern about the functioning of democracy. After all, it is the voters who switch parties from election to election who determine which parties will win or lose. It is therefore the volatile voters who decide whether the parties should continue in government or whether a new majority will have to be formed.¹⁰ The variables which determine volatility can be roughly divided into two groups. Firstly, there are such factors as an individual’s political interest and political knowledge and the crucial question whether their decision to change parties is well considered or not.¹¹ Secondly, researchers want to know whether switching parties expresses a general sense of dissatisfaction with policies, or with a previously supported party, or with politics in general.¹² The data from the PartiRep Election Study allow us to ascertain how far each of these factors characterise the volatile voters who switched party between 2010 and 2014.

Political knowledge and interest

The first question is whether volatile voters are more interested or less interested in politics than those who voted for the same party in two successive elections. To measure the level of political interest of respondents in the PartiRep Election Study they were asked to indicate on a scale of 0 to 10 how much interest they had in politics in general. 0 represented absolutely no interest in politics while 10 stood for a great deal of interest. On average, the respondents gave themselves a value of 4.8. Table 5 shows that voters who switched party between 2010 and 2014 were in general significantly less interested in politics (4.8) than the voters who remained loyal to the party they had voted for in 2010 (5.5).

Furthermore, volatile voters are significantly less knowledgeable about politics. Whereas loyal voters scored an average of 2.5 out of 5 on the knowledge questions in the PartiRep election survey¹³, voters who switched parties between 2010 and 2014 only scored 2.2 (see

Table 5).

Table 5. Interest in politics and political knowledge among consistent and volatile voters

	Interest in politics (0-10)	Political knowledge (0-5)
Average consistent voters	5,50	2,48
Average volatile voters	4,84	2,23
<i>t-value</i>	4,19***	2,85**
N	1.223	1.224

Source: PartiRep election survey 2014. Unweighted data. Only voters entitled to vote in 2010 (+18 years).

Significance level: ** p<0,01; *** p < 0,001.

In the election for the Chamber of Representatives in 2014 an exceptionally large number of voters voted for a different party than they had supported in 2010. A simple analysis of the level of political interest and knowledge suggests that this high level of volatility can certainly not be interpreted as the result of interested and well-informed voters making a considered decision to change parties.

Political trust and political satisfaction

It seems very unlikely that those who switched parties between 2010 and 2014 did so on the basis of information about the parties or the candidates. How then can one explain the large swings in party support which in fact occurred? Some researchers believe that party switching might be an expression of dissatisfaction or even an aversion to politics in general. We shall consider that possibility more closely in the light of information provided by respondents to the PartiRep election study about the level of dissatisfaction with the policies of the Federal government¹⁴, political confidence¹⁵ and satisfaction with the functioning of democracy.¹⁶ From the results in Table 6 we can see that volatile voters are indeed dissatisfied. The voters who voted for a different party in 2014 than in 2010 are significantly less satisfied with both the Federal government and the functioning of democracy in general. Furthermore, the average level of political confidence of volatile voters is lower than that of those who remained loyal to their chosen party of 2010.

Table 6. Satisfaction and political trust

	Satisfaction with the policies of the Federal government (1-5)	Satisfaction with the functioning of democracy (1-4)	Political trust (0-10)
Average of consistent voters	3,15	2,76	5,25
Average of volatile voters	3,00	2,65	4,89
<i>t-value</i>	3,01**	3,18**	4,47***
N	1.207	1.219	1.191

Source: PartiRep election survey 2014. Unweighted data. Only voters entitled to vote in 2010 (+18 years).

Significance level: ** p<0,01; *** p < 0,001.

Conclusion

In spite of the emphasis on the potential impact of floating voters in the final weeks before the

elections, the net swings between 2010 and 2014 turned out to be fairly limited. Particularly in Flanders the elections of 25 May 2014 cannot in any way be labelled as exceptionally unstable. In Wallonia the index of net volatility was historically fairly high, but here too the shifts were less than the Federal elections of

2010. Beneath that relative stability, however, there were big swings between parties. More than 4 out of 10 voters stated that they had voted for a different party in 2014 than in the elections of 2010. From previous research, this figure which is based on the recollections of voters is probably an underestimate of the actual degree to which voters shifted between parties.

A more detailed analysis of these shifts makes it clear that election results alone do not tell the full story. Although the Flemish Liberal Open VLD made a net advance, we should note that a third of its supporters in 2010 voted for the centre right, Flemish Nationalist N-VA in 2014. This makes it very obvious that the N-VA not only attracted voters away from far right Vlaams Belang but that its new support came from all parties of the centre and right. In this way the N-VA succeeded in building up a political force on the right which could not be matched by any party on the left. In Wallonia the swings appear at first sight to have been less one-way. But it is still striking that far left PTB-GOI managed to attract no less than 10% of the socialist PS's numerous supporters. The loss of support for the PS was partly compensated for by an influx of voters who had voted for the Green Party (Ecolo) in 2010.

Although the great majority of voters who switch parties move to a party with a similar ideology, switching itself does not appear to be driven by a high level of interest in or knowledge of politics. However, the large group of voters who switched parties between 2010 and 2014 can certainly be characterised as dissatisfied. The 'winners' of 2014 will be faced with the difficult task of making and keeping their new supporters satisfied.

Four months after the elections, a centre right coalition for the Federal government was constructed. This turn-around at government level is not the result of a swing from the left to the right. At the level of individuals we certainly see a concentration of voters on the right especially in Flanders. And on the left, by contrast, there is fragmentation. As a result of these two tendencies there is a perception that the (centre) right won the elections. But in fact, there were few voters who made the leap from a party on the left to one on the right.

Endnotes

1/ http://verkiezingen2014.belgium.be/nl/cha/results/results_start.html.

2/ PartiRep ('Participation & Representation') is a network of excellence consisting of the leading departments of political science in the country. Since 2007, the network has been subsidised by the Federal Science Policy Office and from 2009 it has been responsible for electoral research in Belgium. The participating institutions are VU Brussels (Kris Deschouwer), KU Leuven (Marc Hooghe), University of Antwerp (Stefaan Walgrave), UL Brussels (Pascal Delwit) en UC Louvain (Benoit Rihoux).

3/ Pedersen, M. (1979). The Dynamics of European Party Systems: Changing Patterns of Electoral Volatility. *European Journal of Political Research* 7 (1): 1-26.

4/ For Flanders we have taken account of all the votes in the provinces of Antwerp, Limburg, East Flanders, Flemish Brabant and West Flanders. For the Walloon region we include all the votes in Hainault, Limburg, Luxemburg, Namur and Walloon Brabant.

5/ For a survey of the advantages and disadvantages of the 'Pedersen index' see Pedersen, M., Katz, R. & Rattinger, H. (1997). Nominations and Reflections. *The Dynamics of European Party Systems*. *European Journal of Political Research* 31 (1): 83-97

6/ Van der Eijk, C. & Niemöller, B. (1983). *Electoral Change in the Netherlands. Empirical Results and Methods of Measurement*. Amsterdam: CT Press; Waldahl, R. & Aardal, B. (2000) The Accuracy of Recalled Previous Voting: Evidence from the Norwegian Election Study. *Scandinavian Political Studies* 23 (4): 373-389.

7/ De Winter, L., Swyngedouw, M. & Dumont, P. (2006). *Party System(s) and Electoral Behaviour in Belgium:*

From Stability to Balkanisation. *West European Politics* 29(5): 933-956.

8/ Walgrave, S., Lefevere, J. & Hooghe, M. (2010). 'Volatiel of wispelturig? [Volatile or Fickle?] Hoeveel en welke kiezers veranderden van stemvoorkeur tijdens de campagne?' In: K. Deschouwer, P. Delwit, M. Hooghe & S. Walgrave (reds) *De stemmen van het volk. Een analyse van het kiesgedrag in Vlaanderen en Wallonië op 10 juni 2009* (pp. 29-50). Brussel: VUBPress.

9/ Dassonneville, R. & Hooghe, M. (2013). Waar komen de lokale N-VA-kiezers vandaan? *Samenleving en politiek* 20 (1): 65-75.

10/ Granberg, D. & Holmberg, S. (1990). The Berelson Paradox Reconsidered. *Intention-Behavior Changes in U.S. and Swedish Election Campaigns. Public Opinion Quarterly* 54 (4): 530-550; Mainwaring, S. & Zoco, E. (2007). Political Sequences and the Stabilization of Interparty Competition: Electoral Volatility in Old and New Democracies. *Party Politics* 13 (2): 155-178.

11/ Dassonneville, R. & Dejaeghere, Y. (2014). Bridging the Ideological Space. A Cross-National Analysis of the Distance of Party Switching. *European Journal of Political Research* te verschijnen; Lachat, R. (2007) *A Heterogeneous Electorate. Political Sophistication, Predisposition Strength and the Voting Decision Process*. Baden-Baden: Nomos.

12/ Söderlund, P. (2008). Retrospective Voting and Electoral Volatility: A Nordic Perspective. *Scandinavian Political Studies* 31 (2): 217-240; Zelle, C. (1995). Social Dealignment versus Political Frustration: Contrasting Explanations of the Floating Vote in Germany. *European Journal of Political Research* 27 (3): 319-345.

13/ Respondents were asked about the composition of the Federal parliament, the president of the Chamber of Representatives, the make-up of the regional government, the number of member states of the European Union and the composition of the Federal government.

14/ Respondents were asked how far they were satisfied with the policies of the Federal government. The categories of response were: Very dissatisfied; Rather dissatisfied; Neither dissatisfied nor satisfied; Fairly satisfied; Very satisfied.

15/ We look at the score which respondents gave in 11 different areas, on a scale of 0 to 10 in which 0 stands for 'No confidence at all' and 10 stands for 'Complete confidence'. The institutions are Justice, Police, the Media, political parties, the Regional (Flemish/Walloon) government, the Regional parliament, the Federal government, the Federal parliament, social movements, politicians and the European Union. Because confidence in each of these institutions hangs together well (own value: 6.05; Cronbach's α 0.91) they were merged into a overall scale of 'political confidence'.

16/ The question was: 'In general, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied or very dissatisfied with the way in which democracy operates in Belgium?'